DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 769 EC 301 803

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TITLE Perspectives on Research in Alcohol and Drug Abuse As It Relates to Special Education and Personnel Preparation.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 12p.; In: Bunsen, Teresa D., Ed., And Others. Forum on Emerging Trends in Special Education: Implications for Personnel Preparation (4th, Washington, D.C., April 9-10, 1992); see EC 301 793.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alcohol Education; Alcoholism; Behavior Change; *Change Strategies; Drug Abuse; Drug Education; Early Intervention; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Dissemination; Prevention; Research Methodology; *Research Needs; *Special Education Teachers; *Substance Abuse; *Teacher Education; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on group discussion by 11 leaders in special education and related disciplines on research in alcohol and drug abuse, in relationship to the preparation of special education personnel. Five main themes emerged from the discussion: (1) prevention and drug education must be put into high gears; (2) systems change efforts, including incentives for manpower development and retention, should be acted on with a high priority; (3) special education should do what it does well, that is change behavior and not be distracted into drug counseling; (4) the major functional features of early intervention should be utilized to guide refinements in much of special education; and (5) meaningful research and dissemination are needed in topics of alcohol and drug abuse. Participants prioritized research topics related to: defining the issue (highest rated topics were research on the impact of substance abuse on learning and memory, and validation of treatments); alternative solutions (highest priorities were given to research on family-focused intervention methods, and staffing and staff training); and obstacles, barriers, and inhibitors (recommended research needs included wider use of individual/single subject research methods and more funding of decision making). (DB)

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Perspectives on Research in Alcohol and Drug Abuse as it Relates to Special Education and Personnel Preparation

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Among the negative impacts of alcohol and drug abuse on our society are the stresses and challenges presented to our educational systems. For local education agencies, the effects of substance abuse appear in forms of behavioral deficits or excesses by students and frustrations shown by teachers and administrators. At the same time, higher education is being pressed to prepare teachers and leadership personnel so that they are better equipped to provide top quality educational experiences for our children. The negative contributions of alcohol and drug abuse to the already complicated challenges faced by our education establishment are being increasingly recognized and deserve direct attention.

In recognition of these issues a "Small Group on Research Needs in Topics of Persons Affected by Alcohol or Drug Abuse" met during the "Forum on Emerging Trends in Special Education: Implications for Training Personnel," Washington, D.C., April 1992. The actions of this small, structured focus group are reported here with points of consideration provided by the author.

Defining the Issue

This Small Group was comprised of eleven professionals holding degrees in special education or related disciplines. Most

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group members were employed in higher-education teacher preparation programs, but one was an OSEP official, and two were in leadership positions in University Affiliated Programs. All were named to the Small Group by organizers of the Forum.

In a period of about two hours, the group engaged in discussion on the topic and completed a brief survey instrument regarding their perception of needs for research in issues of alcohol and drug abuse. Discussion was guided by a "Topical Discussion Guide sheet" that contained three main sections, (a) Defining the Issue, (b) Alternative (Ideal) Solutions, and (c) Obstacles, Barriers, and Inhibitors to Obtaining the Ideal. Each of these sections was further divided into subsections, for example, "Extent and Severity of the Problem," "Behavioral and Social Aspects of the Problem," "Strategies for Progress," and other subsections. The Facilitator used the subsections as prompts to stimulate discussion about research issues.

Procedures for Discussion and Findings

Discussion was facilitated by the Group Leader, with reference to the Guide sheet. This person, and an assigned Recorder, kept contemporaneous notes of the comments of participants. All participants, including the Facilitator and Recorder, provided input on each category of discussion. Every few minutes the Facilitator offered a question or directed attention to headings on the Guide sheet to keep comments on topic and progressing through the identified points.

Five themes that emerged during group discussion are listed below. Under these thematic headings are relevant, paraphrased comments of the participants, as indicated in the two sets of notes and, in part, recalled by the Facilitator.

Theme One: Prevention and Drug Education Must Be Put Into High Gear.

a. We see many and expect to see even more children affected by alcohol and drug abuse; the job is overwhelming.
b. Mothers are giving birth to multiple problem babies.
c. Somebody needs to get "upstream" and stop this flow of problems.
d. Are we [educators] in the "business" of prevention? Who is?
e. The nature and extent of this problem need to be recognized and solutions supported by the general public and policy makers.

Theme Two: Systems-Change Efforts, Including Incentives for Manpower Development and Retention, Should be Acted On with a High Priority.

a. A systematic approach to problems of alcohol and drug abuse is lacking; lacking definition, focus, and leadership.
b. The picture is terribly confounded and includes factors of poverty, family structure, nutrition, etc.
c. Educational systems need to be financed on the basis of children's needs, not labels applied to them.

d. Higher education must be more actively and functionally involved, but that system does not support or reward this type of community-based involvement.

Theme Three: Special Education Should Do What it Does Well - Change And Not Be Distracted.

a. Our human resources are stretched too thin already, we are not equipped to direct major efforts to this problem.
b. Educators should be doing what they know how to do, that is, "change behavior," not be forced into being drug counselors.
c. We must avoid the "medical model road."
d. We need more information about how to use the educational methods we now have with different students.

Theme Four: The Major Functional Features of Early Intervention Should be Utilized to Guide Refinements in Much of Special Education.

a. Early intervention demonstrates the utility and effectiveness of functionality, community-referenced, family-focused, and other practices that should be "pervasive" in education.
b. Intervening as early as possible is where to "invest."

Theme Five: Meaningful Research and Dissemination are Needed in Topics of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

a. We don't have a handle on the problem partly because researchers aren't looking at what special educators need.

b. Research emphasis should go toward identifying effective interventions and quality indicators.

c. Researchers should inform special educators about what's coming so we have the opportunity to plan.

d. There should be RFPs for "crack students" and "effective education."

e. Researchers aren't asking or answering the right questions.

f. Studies need to help with assigning responsibilities among disciplines and treatment models; special education doesn't have to do everything.

The five themes were described by the Facilitator to the Small Group near the end of the meeting period. The membership was asked about their agreement, and all concurred that these statements accurately reflect the deliberations of the group.

Procedures for Identifying Research Needs and Priorities. In the last few minutes of the two hours allotted for this Small Group meeting, the Facilitator distributed a Research Needs Priority Rating Worksheet. This form listed 57 topics related to alcohol and drug abuse in which research could be done. The topics were grouped under the headings used to guide discussion, that is, Defining the Issue, Alternative (Ideal) Solutions, and Obstacles, Barriers, and Inhibitors to Obtaining the Ideal.

To the right of each topic were the numbers 1 ("LOW") through 5 ("HIGH") which could be circled by the responder to indicate their rating of the topic. Participants were asked to read the instructions contained on the form and enter their ratings. The

forms were collected as the participants left the room. Subsequently, the mean, range, and standard deviation were determined for the accumulated ratings. Table 1 contains the 10 top-ranked research topics grouped under the heading "Defining the Issue" and the mean rating for each.

Table 1

The top 10 of 26 research topics related to "Defining the Issue"

Rank	Research Topic	Mean Rating
1.	Impact on learning and memory	4.70
2.	Validation of treatments	4.70
3.	Social/interpersonal dynamics in abuse	4.10
4.	Methods for interpersonal support	4.10
5.	Consumer involvement in dissemination	4.10
6.	Behavior change processes associated with abuse and treatment	4.09
7.	Social/societal impact of A & D abuse	4.00
8.	Effects on abuser's behavior	4.00
9.	Interpersonal approaches to treatment	4.00
10.	Incentives for being free of drug	3.90

Alternative Solutions

The second section on the "Research Needs Priority Rating Worksheet form was used to obtain ratings of research topics related to "Alternative (Ideal) Solutions" to problems of alcohol or drug abuse. These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The top 10 of 24 research topics related to "Alternative Solutions"

Rank	Research Topic	Mean Rating
1.	Family-focused intervention methods	5.00
2.	Staffing and staff training	4.73
3.	Interagency models for treatment (S)	4.70
4.	Treatment methods (C)	4.60
5.	Staff training (C)	4.60
6.	Approaches to prevention (N)	4.60
7.	Early intervention/treatment (I)	4.55
8.	Awareness and public education (I)	4.44
9.	Interagency approaches to prevention (S)	4.40
10.	Interagency treatment models (C)	4.33

Note: I, C, S, and N indicate topics at the Individual, Community, Service Systems, or National level, respectively.

Obstacles, Barriers, and Inhibitors to Obtaining the Ideal

The third portion of the discussion guide sheet and the research needs rating form contained headings and topics related to considerations in reaching solutions to the problems of alcohol and drug abuse. Several of the discussion points listed with the "themes" are noticeable in this regard. Also, direct ratings of seven researchable topics were obtained as described above. These ratings are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

The rankings for the 7 research topics related to "Obstacles, Barriers, and Inhibitors to Obtaining the Ideal"

Rank	Research Topic	Mean Rating
1.	Wider use of individual/single subject research methods	5.00
2.	Funding decision-making	4.00
3.	Policy development	3.89
4.	Application of qualitative research methods	3.78
5.	Wider use of ethnographic and case study methods	3.56
6.	Improved population/group research methods	3.44
7	Leadership enhancement	3.22

Considerations Related to Group Discussion and Ratings. The collected comments of the group members can be taken as indicative of great regard and concern for the well being of students served by our systems of special education. From this perspective, the themes and ratings reported above can be seen as internally consistent. For example, concerns for attending to the business special educators know, learning how to do it better, and calling for constructive systems change, each and collectively demonstrate a commitment to effective interventions for students with special needs.

At the same time, the responses of the group members show frustration with what appears to be an expansion in the role of special education into such matters as preventing drug use, counseling students who abuse drugs, supporting teenage mothers with drug affected babies, and community outreach to build support for drug-related programs. While important services for our citizens, it was the consensus of this group that special educators are not particularly prepared for these roles and may not desire them. In turn, teacher training programs are neither well prepared, nor apparently expected, to instruct special educators in how to be drug interventionists.

These observations suggest the need for constructive review and adjustment of the systems and functional services that are available for our student populations. This important effort may be seen as a large, problem-solving endeavor which should benefit from an appropriate database, that is, empirical studies of

alternative solutions. Each aspect of the system, and our practices, should benefit from a foundation of relevant research.

The data and discussion presented in this paper underscore the value and need for well-considered investigations in topics of alcohol and drug abuse. That these studies need to be directed toward both assisting with systems change and identifying effective interventions is noticeable. Also suggested is expanded consumer involvement in research, a point that is an essential feature of "A Dissemination Policy for Disability and Rehabilitation Research in the Nineties" issued by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (undated). Furthermore, there is clear support for the use of additional research designs and the conduct of studies targeted to the needs of special educators for effective intervention methods. These suggestions are very compatible with the call for conducting relevant research provided by Phil Strain (1988) when he advised us about "separating the winners from the losers." Apparently, this advice is still good.

References

National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (undated). A dissemination policy for disability and rehabilitation research for the nineties. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

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Author Note

Appreciation is extended to the members of the Small Group for their participation, and to the DPP/OSEP and University of Northern Colorado for co-sponsoring the Emerging Trends Conference and this small group opportunity.

Copies of the "Topical Discussion Guide sheet" and the "Research Needs Priority Rating Sheet" are available by request to Dr. Robert E. Crow, Director, Human Development Center, School of Allied Health Professions, LSUMC, 1100 Florida Ave., New Orleans, LA 70119.